

**THE THEATRE  
THE CINEMA AND  
OURSELVES**



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THE THEATRE  
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*“Je m’en fiche  
de votre jeu  
travaillé”*

Mounet-Sully’s  
answer to Coquelin’s  
insistence on  
learning to act.

*Final scene from THE  
BEST YEARS OF OUR  
LIVES: The bride of the  
sailor with steel hands  
—Cathy O’Donnell.*





CYRIL BRUYN ANDREWS

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THE THEATRE  
THE CINEMA AND  
OURSELVES

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CHANGES

CHALLENGES

SCHOOL-AGE

COMPARISONS

THE YOUNG WOMEN OF TO-DAY

ENVOI

POSTSCRIPT

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THE SIGN OF THE DOLPHIN, AYLESBURY, BUCKS

ENGLAND

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## LUNCH AT THE CLUB

A WELL-KNOWN, middle-aged actor, a colonial governor and a prison visitor were lunching at the club and out of compliment to our actor guest we talked of the theatre. "You like my acting?" he asked, his round face beaming with pride.

I had known him as a schoolboy before he had given up cricket for the theatre and I risked offending him. "I am afraid I don't like 'acting'!"

He looked rather shocked and glanced at the colonial governor who was smiling complacently and at the prison visitor's knowing countenance. Surely they spent their life in acting, so why shouldn't he do his bit on the stage?

"Can't you see the change that is taking place?" I added. "People are going to the theatre for quite different reasons."

He was inclined to agree but he did not know what to do about it. It struck uncomfortably deep at the foundations of life and it was too late, or he was too lazy, to change.

"We must sublimate our ideas by dwelling in the realms of fantasy," the colonial governor said politely; he was a very cultured man.

"We all delight in make-believe," the prison visitor agreed with a pleasant smile.

The middle-aged actor looked relieved. "I must go and see my agent. Come and see our new show"—he glanced at me—"if you can put up with 'acting'!"

We three were left alone. "Are you writing a book?" the prison visitor asked suspiciously. He often caught criminals out by a direct question.

"Possibly," I answered.

"Do you really think that the theatres and cinemas are changing?" the colonial governor asked. He too found the present age of transition uncomfortable.

"More than we realize," I said, "'acting' in the old-fashioned sense of the word is less popular every day."

"You must give examples." The prison visitor sat back with an air of defiance.

"Of course I will, as many as you like, ancient and modern."

"It is all rather disconcerting," the colonial governor sighed. "Acting was so picturesque. I suppose you consider the glamour of the past a mere mass of cobwebs, outside the main stream of life."

I nodded. He had always been remarkably good at appreciating other people's ideas, even at his prep. school.

"I'll read it," the prison visitor said patronizingly, "if it's not all theory and you really will give examples."

I promised—and to this lunch I gratefully dedicate this book.

# CHANGES

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## 1. EXIT THE ACTOR

THERE have always been people who have refused to act, perhaps on principle, perhaps because they couldn't even if they had wished to. Queen Victoria refused to act, though she liked watching Disraeli; and she made a great success at being herself. Ellen Terry never acted, she always got inside her parts though for years she occupied the stage with Henry Irving. I like to think of both Ellen Terry and Queen Victoria smiling sweetly whilst Irving and Disraeli performed.

Hollywood did us a great service, it reduced acting to such an absurdity—even the scenery acted—that we inevitably grew tired of it. More sensitive in some ways than the stage, the cinema saw what was happening. A new public was growing that wanted to probe deeper into life instead of seeing a magnified distortion of stereotyped emotions or else empty banalities. Who was going to help them? You cannot order the unknown, however much capital you have at your disposal. With surprising agility of mind they thought of Ann Todd and Angela Lansbury, there had been quite enough descriptive acting, they wanted someone who could *be* something, someone who could get inside the thoughts and feelings of a particular human being.

So the change is coming even more from the cinema than the theatre. Perhaps a gesture, perhaps the inflection of a voice gives us something that belongs, not only to no other actor or actress but to no other human being, he or she *is* the character, that particular old man, that particular schoolgirl, not our general conception of what an old man or a schoolgirl is like.

Of course we still have our big impersonal shows, our sensual delights, we are most of us still in the same condition as the schoolboy who, when asked what he liked best, answered (1) sneezing, (2) my mother, and financiers will always be eager to give us mass productions to gratify our senses. It is so easy. They provide the snuff. We sneeze. But even in these shows there lurks some element of intimacy.

The smaller shows, at the Windmill, are of course more intimate and are not concerned with mere nudity, mere stereotyped singing and dancing. Who among the audience does not pick out a particular singer or dancer who possesses something that is essentially herself, the qualities that a manager looks out for in a budding star? Even in the colourful symbolic ballet there is emerging something very personal, *HAMLET* has appeared as a very personal ballet, and in *UNDERTOW* there is a very personal victim of a mother complex.

Owing to the commercial necessity of creating so many films the mass-produced film is still in the vast majority but the percentage of films that have a life of their own is increasing with astonishing rapidity. Almost every month we go to some play or film and realize with rather a shock that a new person has been conceived, very human without being a type, of the stuff of which we ourselves are made, yet quite different. Producers are at last realizing that a constructed type, on or off the stage, will always be dull and lifeless while a fresh human being, spontaneously conceived, will always be a surprise and a delight.





## 2. IN DEAR KING EDWARD'S COSTUME DAYS

IT is astonishing to look back on the days when Marie Tempest twirled her parasol on the stage and Charles Hawtrey or Gerald du Maurier lit their cigarettes with such affected naturalness; if you did the same at Ascot or Ranelagh you were more likely to be introduced to a duchess—that is, if the duchess liked that kind of thing.

It is not so very long ago that Beerbohm Tree in his sumptuous productions at His Majesty's tried to smother Shakespeare in gestures and costumes. In the all-star show at The Coronation Gala Performance in 1911 "the Forum scene from JULIUS CAESAR gave Tree the opportunity to surround himself with perhaps three hundred of the most popular London actors," and King George and Queen Mary, reflecting the Edwardian period, celebrated their accession by seeing the subtle flavour of Ben Jonson, Shakespeare and Sheridan completely drowned in display.

We have learnt a lot since then. In the past ten years, scarcely interrupted by

the bombing of London, we have had a series of films and plays in which the dressing-up has been merely incidental. We have realized that in costume plays, if the interest and sincerity of the characters ebb ever so little, one is left with something pretty to look at and little else—and mere prettiness is out of date. Turgenev's *THREE SISTERS* was perhaps the greatest step forward, followed, not so very long after, by *A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY*. They were costume plays by accident. What matter what kind of clothes the characters wore if their misery was so poignant that "as they reached out for happiness they could not close their hands on it"?

There was also the sincerity of Michael Redgrave who lived in his play, *UNCLE HARRY*—when alerts and the sound of bombs were heard outside it was not the costumes that made one forget them but the people in the play. Some of the best costume films, however, were even sincerer than the plays. Robert Morley, memorable as he was in the play *THE FIRST GENTLEMAN*, was inclined to "act" the Prince Regent; while Claude Rains, in a film in London at the same time, *was* Mr. Skeffington, not a performance.

Classics if overdressed tend to produce self-consciousness, *THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL*, *THE RIVALS*, Congreve's *LOVE FOR LOVE* sometimes become a mere mixture of pageant and affectations. It is a pity we cannot see them as new plays. Even Emlyn Williams could hardly have imparted so much simple sincerity into *THE CORN IS GREEN* if it had been labelled as a great classic.

Often in quite minor costume plays and films we have little masterpieces, the Victorian romances *FANNY BY GASLIGHT* and *THE VALLEY OF DECISION*, were appreciated for their own merits, and not for their dresses or period effects. Happily it is comparatively rare for a film or a play to be produced merely because its costumes are thought quaint. Walt Disney has satisfied our desire for the quaint to the full and in a delightfully naïve way. When the quaint is a mere intruder it almost inevitably fails, Lillo's eighteenth-century *FATAL CURIOSITY* faltered badly, when the parents murdered their own son we smiled self-consciously not sure if we were shocked or bored, or vaguely amused. We may not know whether it was meant as a joke or not when it was first produced but at the Arts quaint costume was not enough and we were left in a state of bored confusion.

To-day the reception of mere costume plays is as doubtful in the provinces as in London. On the crest of the wave of the Edwardian delight in costume Fred Terry and Julia Neilson "acted" and dressed up for all they were worth and both had a great following in the provinces. But in their day the provinces were usually merely the provinces, not places where plays for London were tried out.

It is probable that to-day the provinces are even more critical than London of plays that depend on the success of their dresses—even modern dresses. After seeing an up-to-date film or play would the ladies of Manchester imitate the twirl of a modern Marie Tempest's parasol or the men copy the appearance or the gestures of a perfectly tailored Charles Hawtrey or Gerald du Maurier? Such affected naturalness would probably only produce a tolerant smile.

### 3. DESCRIPTIONS AND THE TYPES DEPART

GREAT EXPECTATIONS hardly lived up to its title and NICHOLAS NICKLEBY was certainly disappointing, though Dickens was just the kind of author that any film producer would choose—until a few years ago. He anticipated the material of which films were made by a hundred years, his characters were types, drawn with a bold brush—people often remarked “there goes a Dickens character”—he wrote “scenarios”, he could be blood-curdling, he could be pathetic. He belonged to an age when to describe was not to destroy but to amuse, the great author was essentially a great describer.

But just when the Dickens films were being prepared the cinema became aware that the future held something quite different in store. Types were growing old-fashioned, descriptions tedious. The thunder storms, the blasted heath, the cowering boy, the terrifying ex-convict had little to do with this new world and it was these things that the film makers had arranged to copy in GREAT EXPECTATIONS and copy so truthfully that the film and the original illustrations were almost exactly the same.

A bolder production might have tried to re-create Dickens in its own imagination, not merely made an attempt to imitate him. How well the cinema could have given us the opening scene of Mr. Pickwick, the distant hills with the sun bursting through, and a moment later Mr. Pickwick, in the form of say Edmund Gwenn, bursting a very personal radiance through the gap in the windows he had just flung open. Or imagine the death of the clown on the screen. A few years ago the cinema would have tried to out-Dickens Dickens—“a glaze in the eye”, “a rattling noise in the throat”, “a short stifled moan”, “walls and ceilings alive with reptiles”, millions of them. But they would not attempt that now. They would probably give us a clown far more of a whole, far more himself, than a Dickens’ character. Dickens wrote with one pair of hands and they were, alas, always his own; the film is capable of give us unexpected surprises, it has begun to create, not merely to impersonate.

Of course even the greatest writers sometimes describe types—there are Shakespeare’s fops, Sheridan’s snobs, Shaw’s dummies on which he pinned his witty labels, but these were merely the playthings of the period. With the great parts it was very different. Shylock was Shylock, not just a Jew; and Ophelia’s “there’s Rosemary, that’s for remembrance” is not just “the sort of remark a girl like that would make”.

It is extraordinary how little effect these descriptive characters have on the life of their times. Galsworthy’s SKIN GAME, a perfect anecdotal picture, put no brake on the hatred of Jews, nor did Wells’s realistic forecasts stop two world wars. Victorian England did not start an immediate crusade to alleviate the miseries that Dickens so vividly described. Perhaps everything was so real that there was no room for anything else, morals were there but so sharply obvious that they seem as petrified as the rest. The Greek love of tragedy as an end in itself was over and one living human being who was not a type and who was not being described might have suggested a better world.



Almost without realizing it we are ceasing to be satisfied with scenic people, crowds do not gather before the impersonal glamour of a film star crudely depicted on a poster. As we fall in love with a particular person so we are tending to appreciate people, rather than types, live creations in a play or a film in which the player and the part are one. The players who have lived in their parts survive, the "actors" are soon forgotten.

#### 4. SHOWING OFF

THE theatre and the cinema alike are learning that it is a mistake to "show off", to "talk for effect", showing off used to please, but now it wearies a growing section of the public. Even the fascinating mannerisms of Charlie Chaplin which formed such a large proportion, but not all, of what we used to call his genius have lost their charm.

Lately, however, there have been some unexpected set backs. Poor Cleopatra has had a rough deal. Both in the cinema and in the theatre, people have been showing themselves off under the historical glamour of her name. First there came CAESAR AND CLEOPATRA, a film that apparently required the outside of the cinema to be redecorated at a time of great labour shortage. Inside it was equally expensive. Surely after HENRY V it was not necessary for the cinema to have another crowded flare up and so soon, or did the success of HENRY V invite it? Then there came ANTHONY AND CLEOPATRA on the stage, Edith Evans showing off Edith Evans, no wonder poor Godfrey Tearle lost some of his self-confidence and hardly knew what to do when faced with Edith Evans instead of Cleopatra.

But the crowds in the film and Edith Evans on the stage were to be followed by a new kind of showing off. In "NOW BARABBAS . . ." the outward and visible effects of homosexuality were shown off crudely and apparently merely for us to gloat over. It was not that one wanted a moral, obvious morals too often miss their mark, it was something tender, personal, appealing that was lacking. How shattering, how convincing a play might have been that showed a homosexual in which this characteristic was but an aspect of his whole character though possibly an all-pervading one. Instead we had a mere one-track exhibitionism, bad enough off the stage but intolerable on it, in striking contrast to the drab realism of BOYS IN BROWN.

One of the most notable examples of genteel exhibitionism adorned the Hay-market stage for several years. LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN, so over-decorated that any merits of the play peeped out by accident, was sponsored by the C.E.M.A. and apparently deemed to be of educational value. Wilde has become a "classic" and so with official sanction and the help of Cecil Beaton he must be shown off. The historians of the future, however, will find it difficult to understand the long runs of such plays, stagnant backwaters in the midst of so much that is vital on the stage and on the screen.

# CHALLENGES

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## 5. KINGS, QUEENS AND SUCHLIKE

BOTH the stage and the screen have always had difficulty with kings and queens, for in their everyday life they are so little known. They nearly always appear on parade, the puppets of their press agents, or in a *studied* intimacy of home life—reminiscent of Laurence Housman's ANGELS AND MINISTERS. Even Shakespeare failed to produce a really human, personal sovereign. Henry V is a magnificent stage façade, Henry VIII an essentially theatre monarch, while Hamlet's uncle does little more than register the dramatic values expected of him.

We seldom get really intimate passages such as "Queen Victoria walked briskly to her room—she wished she was not so short—the more she liked Disraeli, the more he irritated her, more than Gladstone in his way, she merely detested Gladstone which was quite a different thing. But there was always the new face powder. What a blessing smells were when one was annoyed and had to face the daily Parliamentary report." Even if we did get that kind of thing we should, perhaps quite rightly, think it cheap and not believe it.

In VICTORIA REGINA there is a pleasing two-dimensional picture but is there a real person? Do we really believe in her as a living human being? Who can re-create these quite ordinary people made unique by the lives they are forced to lead? There are, of course, two methods. You start with a purely fictitious character, born of your imagination, and, being careful not to let any "facts" get in the way, develop it. But how impossible to forget scattered anecdotes, reminiscences, letters, how easy to produce an unconvincing mixture of fact and fiction. But the opposite method is perhaps worse. *Real facts* illuminating the whole personality are rare—those who know don't tell and those who tell don't know. How varied for instance are our conceptions of Queen Victoria's youth—a refined girlish queen on the one hand, on the other a rather pleasantly coarse young woman who loved a romp and like her son Edward talked with a distinctly German accent. Contemporary propaganda and the iconoclast tendencies of a subsequent age colour both extremes. The intimate self of a sovereign is so carefully guarded, minor incidents minimized, others exaggerated, many never told, that what we read or see on the stage or screen is usually little more than the reflection of a nation's contemporary or retrospective desires.

But this nation-made conception of a sovereign, partly created by press agents but not altogether, has often an interest of its own. Tudor England stepped into the skin of Queen Elizabeth and worshipped itself, there was no doubt much strutting at Lambeth as well as at the court. Stuart England stepped into the skin of Charles I and began to hate itself. When Charles was executed something that had once been

dear to England and had at last become repugnant committed suicide. England was growing up and in growing up killed its past self, a belief in the divine right of kings, that it had once loved so dearly.

The Hanoverians were the embodiment of a new idea, kingship as a convenience. The belief in a divine king had gone and a bourgeois England stepped into the skin of a bourgeois monarch. The Hanoverians still strutted, for the ordinary man still strutted too, but it was a swank rather than a strut, and the Prince Regent was known to laugh at himself.

When Victoria ascended the throne the taste for strutting was passing, there had been executions on the continent. Besides how could a very young girl, who later was to become a little widow in black, strut? Victoria created a new England and a new England created Victoria, they lived in each other, both felt themselves the chosen of God, that was their strength and their weakness. But Victoria found that she and Gladstone could not both represent God to the nation. She could not link her arm as she had done with the flamboyant Disraeli, who was no incarnation of God, he was no rival in religious supremacy, he was too much a man of the world to suggest anything so controversial.

A sovereign in a biography, play or film can be a very human, a very personal symbol of a nation's feelings. But little more. In spite of some charming and life-like plays the sovereign's real self must nearly always end in the nation's conception. Possibly as we grow more and more weary of descriptions and types we shall discard this nation-created conception of a sovereign. But it is difficult to picture what will follow. Press agents and propaganda seem to be an inevitable part of the national machinery of which the sovereign is in many ways the centre and without which it is doubtful whether the machinery would function at all.

But press agents seldom interfere directly with the life of the theatre or with the chief films that most cinemas present and this gives both an important position in a democratic state.

## 6. MODERNIZING HAMLET

DESCRIPTIVE characters, good or bad, will always be waiting for dull unimaginative people to copy as they copy well-known pictures in public galleries. To re-create a character anew and not to copy would to them mean failure. But characters with the spark of life in them are also always waiting for someone to re-create in his own image. Hamlet is always with us because in him Shakespeare created so human a person that every player longs to enter the part and give us himself as Hamlet; only the second-rate "act" the part, or try to reduce it to mere description or a type. In Hamlet the intimate self of any player worthy of the name will out, he is Hamlet and himself, or he is nothing. Hamlet must be continually reborn, not "acted".

It is natural that there should be attempts to modernize HAMLET, either the whole setting of the play or Hamlet himself. But modernization is usually too impersonal





a thing, too superimposed, it is impossible to ask anyone to create Hamlet and deal with modernization, imposed from without, at the same time.

In 1925 Sir Barry Jackson attempted Hamlet in modern dress in order to bring it nearer to the public, and if they had been able to treat it as naturally as the players it might have achieved its object. But to perform Hamlet in trunk and hose has become so customary that Hamlet in plus fours or a dinner jacket must seem artificial. You cannot get away from the awkwardness, one does not get nearer Hamlet in that way.

In 1936-37 at The Old Vic there was an attempt at creating a new and more modern Hamlet by making him an acrobat as well as a philosopher. This was no stage Hamlet in the old-fashioned sense of the word though in the more modern sense he was very stagey. Laurence Olivier leapt amongst the battlements with the agility of an ape, one almost expected him to swing from one of the turrets. But is this modernization, or even what Laurence Olivier really felt?

Nearly ten years later we had Alec Clunes, merging the beauty of Shakespeare's words with the beauty of their sound, never superimposing the one on the other but achieving a perfect union. Yet though easy and natural there was something strangely impersonal and, as in Gielgud's rendering, a curious lack of intimacy. Hamlet, after all, was a man, and to speak lines beautifully, avoiding rather obvious pitfalls, is not enough.

Bradfield College a year later modernized Hamlet in the best possible way by forgetting that it belonged to any period, Hamlet must be genuinely created from within. Here was no tinkering with Shakespeare, the boy who played Hamlet at Bradfield was really inside the part, the schoolboy yet Hamlet. We believed in him as much as we believed in the rain that drenched us as we watched. "In the mind's eye, Horatio," was said lightly but a little impatiently and there was a youthful impatience in "There are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamed of in *your* philosophy." He might also have added, "you silly ass". Yet again there was impatience though of a different kind in "Rest, rest perturbed spirit," and an almost petulant irritation in "words, *words*, WORDS".

It is possible that the modern schoolboy has more depth and sympathy with life than the schoolboy of yesterday and in this Bradfield Hamlet the depth and sympathy were never forced, it was youth giving us of its best, and it was a very individual youth, not a mass of instructions and stage directions. Modernization must, of course, come if Hamlet is not to be a museum piece but it must come, as at Bradfield, from within and not by a producer's "words, *words*, WORDS".



## 7. SAROYAN

SAROYAN ought to be the name of a drink—which indeed it sounds like—and of a distinctly intoxicating one. But pure Saroyan, that is the drink itself, plays actually by the author, can be had in very different strengths. *THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE* is pure Saroyan but it is not the very heady kind, all through the play you feel that those scenes in the bar, or something very like them, might have happened.

*THE BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE*, on the other hand, is as strong as he can make it, it has

the reality of fantasy not of life. As with a strong intoxicant you must forget everything but the sensation of the moment, so with neat Saroyan human doubts must become the doubts of humanity not of individuals. The atmosphere must remain true to itself, you must not plunge now and again, as you do even in the purest Saroyan, into something intensely intimate and personal. "He is frail and he's frightened but I've found him," Agnes whispers and suddenly becomes very much Agnes, for a moment



*THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE.* (Arnold Marle, Frederick Valk, Walter Crisham.) 1946.



half awake to the facts of life. Out of Saroyan mists a very real person suddenly emerges and then vanishes. It is perhaps something impish in Saroyan that likes to give us this disconcerting jolt, a jolt felt all the more in the purest Saroyan plays than in those that are Saroyan and water. But if we give way to this sort of thing all is lost.

As there is, or used to be, a drink called "near Port" so there is a near Saroyan and it is not very exciting stuff. *THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH* must be classed as near Saroyan and, though there are many witty situations and witty lines, it has feet of clay. *A PHENIX TOO FREQUENT* is near Saroyan too but, not being so ambitious, it is more palatable. The disembodied spirits have the charm of the slightly highbrow but not too highbrow charade, and it would be churlish to blame a charade for not being a play.

Perhaps some of the greatest plays are those which have little to do with the Saroyan atmosphere but in which the author has deliberately built a bridge between what one may call the mystical and the realistic, a bridge on which we may linger and look both ways with little fear that it will give way beneath us. We have lately stood on the Strindberg bridge in *THERE ARE CRIMES AND CRIMES* and on the Ibsen bridge in *THE MASTER BUILDER* and also in *THE LADY FROM THE SEA*, though the former is a firmer structure than the latter. Perhaps the most baffling recent example of this type of play is Henry James's *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*, for though the bridge is there one end rests on the unknown. Yet both ends seem very human and it is a very human pity we feel for the bewildered boy for his misery often hovers, like our own, between two worlds, both inhabited by very human beings. Much, however, that seemed illusive in Henry James's novel seemed resolved in the play and we hope the experiment will not end with *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*, it was far too convincing.

It may be that because no bridge is necessary Saroyan's plays remain a little uncanny yet a great influence on the modern stage, it would be the poorer without them, less elastic. His creations are at one and the same time puppets and disembodied spirits, and are *we* not also sometimes both at once? They must be enjoyed to be believed. *THE BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE* has the quality of poetry though it is prose. It takes us into another world where nothing else matters. Does not our real world often seem an illusion too, such stuff as dreams are made of?

Saroyan certainly shows up the cardboard rubbish of the hack routine play, and perhaps makes the plays that have life in them a little more alive, a little less certain. The characters become more individual for, paradoxical as it may seem, it is when doubts arise that individuality grows. But Saroyan itself must be taken neat, not self diluted or weakened by foolish imitators. We must learn what Liberty (or fantasy if you will) in the Saroyan sense means if we attempt Saroyan plays. "God made all His creatures free, Life itself is liberty," wrote James Montgomery, and that, as the *Sunday Times* remarks, is Saroyan's watchword.

## 8. BIRTH, MARRIAGE AND DEATH

NOTHING can obliterate the importance of birth, marriage and death. Our views on them may change, and change drastically, but they still remain the main factors of life, be the cynics as cynical as they please, the stage as glamorous or sordid.

The variations on these three themes are endless, changing with time and place. What one worships another ridicules, and often ridicules all the more because he realizes the weakness of his case. To-day, perhaps more than ever before, we have an almost limitless variety of aspects. In many theatres and cinemas much of the artificiality that characterized the themes of such Victorian plays as *THE SECOND MRS. TANQUERAY* still exists to-day, but in the outlying London theatres and in the smaller theatres, belonging to clubs and so unsupervised by the censor, frankness and freedom often abound.

In every direction there are pointers to what is happening. The banalities in the French film, *THE WELL-DIGGER'S DAUGHTER*, dealing with the eternal problem of the illegitimate child, and of the play, *MESSAGE FOR MARGARET*, giving us the clash between mistress and wife, are in striking contrast to such plays as *THE CELIBATE* or *ON THE WAY*. *THE CELIBATE* deals with the effects, direct and indirect, of a celibacy, enforced by fate, and *ON THE WAY* tackles straightforwardly the attitude of the well-educated woman who insists on having a child as a right in itself and quite openly treats all objections as trivial and irrelevant. One must not forget such plays as *ROBERT'S WIFE*, where orthodox religion conflicts with obvious medical expediency, nor the young woman in *AND NO BIRDS SING* pulled in opposite directions by the prospect of marriage and her profession as a doctor. Nor the importance of the comedies. The bride, in *FOOLS RUSH IN*, who reads the marriage service for the first time a few hours before her wedding and decides that it is all a lot of nonsense, has a far deeper significance than mere farce. It was preceded many years before by the admirable *DOVER ROAD* at the Haymarket Theatre where Henry Ainley with a whimsical humour waylays run-a-way couples and compels them to live together for a few weeks to see if they really want to continue their running away. In such plays, however varied in outlook, real people live and capture our sympathy; the dramatic situations, and even the theme itself, arise naturally and incidentally, and they probably do more good than many a sermon.

Death is more difficult to deal with. We know no sequel. But we make guesses in the theatre and occasionally with considerable details. Our powers of invention are no longer blurred over by the mists of mysticism though the next world is sometimes made rather artificially into a dream. In *FEAR NO MORE*, Mr. Arcularis is a very real person though he dwells in the hereafter. What happens to him may not give us any very interesting information, yet such plays inevitably give us a new outlook on death and do something to put a break on the apparent indifference which sometimes characterizes our attitude to everything not directly concerned with the petty details of living.

But post war apathy is merely a passing phase and there are an increasing number of people intensely alert to almost any point of view. Every year the theatre and the cinema give our minds more and more to feed on. They preach sermons in many obvious and in many less obvious ways and may be said in many respects to have superseded the church. Possibly, without knowing it, we are returning to the old morality plays. Certainly to-day's treatment of birth, marriage and death, though sometimes crude, is usually free from all hypocrisy. We seem to have on the stage and the screen, if not in the church, the beginnings of a renaissance.

## 9. "AND THE MORAL OF THAT IS . . ."

WE are in no mood to-day for routine thought, for outworn dogma or ritual that has lost its meaning, and if the church realized it as much as the theatre, religion would flourish to-day as it never has before. A new phase cannot be influenced by old methods.

We seldom moralize now-a-days about good and evil—and certainly not on the stage and the screen. We prefer, as in *PATRICIA'S SEVEN HOUSES*, to moralize about our blindness to facts; when we have faced them fearlessly and honestly it will be time enough to see what good or evil they contain. Patricia, inheriting seven brothels, was quite oblivious to the nature of her inheritance, and still less to the fact that running immoral houses, though it has its risks, is a very sound financial business. No doubt they were right to put on this entertaining play, too few of us pay due attention to the profits from brothels—in which we may unwittingly have a share.

What war really means to the individual soldier is another matter we are trying to face honestly and fearlessly. It is useless to put on dull symbolic plays such as *THE DOVE AND THE CARPENTER*, each character representing a nation, they are almost certain to bore us. But it may be useful, as in *EXERCISE BOWLER*, to show us once more the idealization of war on the one hand and what it really means on the other. Or again, let us learn, if we need to, how to deal with genius, how useless it is to badger a musician like Bach, full of his silver trumpets, with the petty worries of an ordinary mortal's life. From such plays we learn that a moral, even an obvious or unsatisfactory one, does not necessarily mean a dull play. There are many dull plays without the vestige of a moral.

Amongst the subtler or more atmospheric plays we often have an all-pervading sense of doom, an urge to rescue humanity from the plight we see before us. The standardization of life, for instance, in *TO-MORROW'S CHILD* gives us a feeling that we are being drawn into the grasp of an impersonal machine of our own making and that, having become part of it ourselves, our fate is inevitable. *MARROWBONE LANE* is again a play of seemingly inevitable doom but we are concerned with individuals rather than with fate and there appears to be a chance of escape for at least one victim. Now this, now that seems to enslave her, it is a play of a hundred pin pricks





MARROWBONE LANE. (*Shelagh Richards, Daphne Carroll, Terry Wilson, St. John Barry.*) 1946.

rather than of an iron grasp, and one feels that something ought to be done. The answer, of course, is kindness, but kindness is not there.

Of the difficulty of receiving a young German into an English or American home we have had two striking examples, each in its way as pathetic as MARROWBONE LANE. Frieda arrives in her English home, tentative but cheerful, the fiancée of a young Englishman, and only gradually succumbs to a host of frustrations. The boy in TO-MORROW THE WORLD, plunged into an American home, is younger and his fate is perhaps even more painful, he is so confident that the Nazi faith is right and he feels it is almost unbelievable that people who wish to be friendly with him should not believe in it too. If painfulness produces reform—and perhaps it does—these plays should have done a lot to further a better understanding between us and the young German of to-day.

PRESENT LAUGHTER is one of the most entertaining and in its way one of the most significant moral plays of recent years. "I am sick to death of people acting all over the place," Noel Coward exclaims, for who can believe that Noel Coward in the play is anyone but himself, Garry Essendine is the flimsiest disguise. Outwardly the play is nothing but a bit of impudence, a kind of French farce that might have been played to crowded houses at Margate or Monte Carlo for its savours of both. Inwardly it is a personal recantation, or a very plausible imitation, of an uncomfortable past. Who at one time or another has not been wearied by the followers that Noel Coward created, unconsciously burlesquing their idol, insufferable bores to all but their own clique? Here on the Haymarket stage the followers have come home to roost and the idol suffers. It was no doubt written as a comedy but to-day it hovers on the brink of something more. Leave your vapid frivolities, they won't live, his real well-wishers urge, and do something worthy, act PEER GYNT! To hell with you, Mr. Essendine Coward exclaims, if you mention my acting PEER GYNT again I *will*—if I have to hire Drury Lane to do it. Mr. Coward, in his maturity, if we may point a moral, has a charm too fine, too fragile, to be wasted on camp followers. We await the next act, for the last act leaves us with a problem, it only gives us present laughter. Where or when the next phase will take place no one knows—least of all probably Mr. Essendine Coward. It may not be for several years and in the meantime the orchestra may play many interludes.

Possibly there is an even better way of conveying a moral, the way of the fairy tale which is not for a time but for all ages. There are certainly fairy tales on the stage and screen to-day that equal, if not surpass, the Grimms or Hans Anderson, they are as traditional and probably as lasting. Long after the repetative antics of many of our popular stage and screen actors and actresses are forgotten the appeal of Veronica Lake's I MARRIED A WITCH will survive with its simple but important moral that love conquers even witchcraft. Each succeeding generation will surely understand its varying charm and its central theme for who has not felt the power of love battering down our daily illusions, the fear of some witchcraft, whatever its form, which seems to overwhelm us?

"And the moral of that—" is surely not an unsatisfactory way in which to leave a play, for are we not all in our own peculiar way moralists at heart?



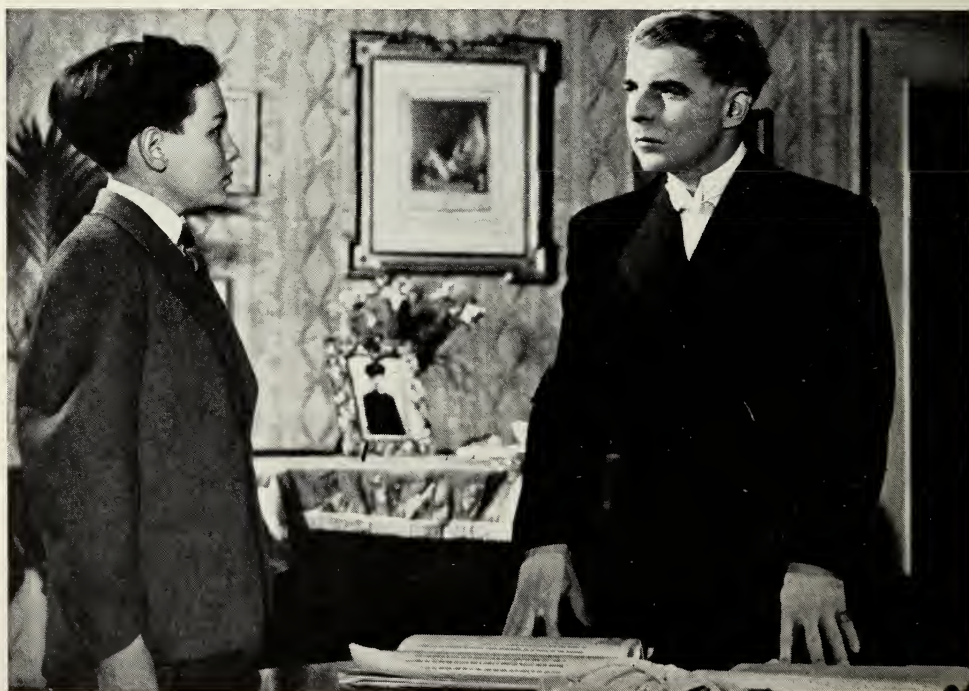
# SCHOOL AGE

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## 10. SCHOOL-BOYS, YESTERDAY AND TO-DAY

Boys are fascinating on the stage and screen now they have escaped from the typical aspects that the Victorians so loved to portray. Even in such apparently intimate books as *Tom Brown's School Days* there were merely different types with only here and there something essentially individual, while in *Vice Versa*, so popular years ago, there was just a typical schoolboy. Nor do typical school pranks, the dozens of ice-cream trolleys dashing after a criminal in the film *HUE AND CRY* amuse us, young or old, for more than a moment. Instead we prefer *THE WINSLOW BOY* or *THE GUINEA PIG*, the individual schoolboy within the type, not the type drowning the individual.

There is an important problem in *THE WINSLOW BOY*, neither slurred over nor over-emphasized. Should a misdemeanour by a mere schoolboy be taken seriously because he belongs to His Majesty's Navy? Must a standard of conduct be preserved



*THE WINSLOW BOY.* (Michael Newell and Emlyn Williams as the boy's counsel.) 1946.



by sacrificing humanity and common-sense? *THE GUINEA PIG* raises a perhaps even more vital question. What is to be done with a boy who for class or other reasons finds himself in a hopeless minority at a school intended for a very different type?

The boys in both plays are direct, sincere, individual and right *in* their parts. No longer do academies of dramatic art teach acting instead of living in a part nor do producers order a boy to be sent them as you order a bag of potatoes. When, for example, a young under-study appears we see a different, but not necessarily a less natural, performance. It is the interesting contrast one discovers when schools of dramatic art produce plays with the lead played quite differently by a different person in each act. Never has the atmosphere of the theatre been freer, healthier or more fraught with possibilities.

It is curious that all plays with children in them were put in the shade by the dramatization of a Victorian novel, Henry James's *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*. But he was in advance of his time. Here is the problem of the young boy probed to a painful degree. Yet it is no unusual, no magnified, no fantastic problem, it is the everyday problem of growing up. Evil influences, unwholesome atmospheres were not portrayed on the stage but hovered in the background behind the acts of the puzzled and well-meaning. There was, however, nothing mystical in the results, they were too distressingly true to life. The still quite young boy is fascinated by an unpleasant middle-aged man who never appears but whose presence in the boy's thoughts is painfully obvious. At the same time the boy is drawn, possibly from a desire to escape, to a healthy youngish woman of about thirty, almost over-anxious for his welfare. Can he confide to her the truth, the whole truth, about that sinister figure always spiritually so close to him? What young boy has not at one time or another been in that position?



*THE GUINEA PIG.* (Derek Blomfield and Joan Hickson as the boy's mother.) 1946.



THE TURN OF THE SCREW. (*Brian Weske and Elspeth March.*) 1946.

Surely there is no excuse for misunderstanding the problems of boyhood with *THE WINSLOW BOY*, *THE GUINEA PIG* and *THE TURN OF THE SCREW* all running in London at the same time. They are a fine tribute to the sincerity and sympathy of the theatre of to-day.



## 11. SCHOOL-GIRLS

WE are turning to some sort of sanity with regard to school-girls as well. The under sixteens were during most of the nineteenth century considered goofy and awkward, now it is often we who feel goofy and awkward.

We are realizing that when Holbein painted his famous Duchess of Milan he was painting a quite young girl and we have re-discovered that Juliet was just a young girl too—a young girl who might have been living in Wimbledon or Hammersmith. There have been attempts lately to give perhaps a too childish Juliet, but Renée Asherson got inside Juliet's girlish heart with a sincerity and charm that few will forget. Even Juliet's punning, a difficult passage, had the delight of a child. Many of us have been dwelling in a confused jumble of misconceptions about school-girls and have thereby lost a great deal of their poetry and their commonsense. It is time that we forgot *their* lack of balance and thought of ours instead.

It is difficult to understand why we should have treated them as fully grown women or as mere infants instead of as the delightful people they are. It is as difficult to understand as why in many of Shakespeare's plays we treated these school-girls' fathers as doddering old men. Possibly it was only one of the blunders that the Victorians, and even the Georgians, made and that earlier these absurdities were not so common.

But even in our sincerer age we still sometimes have the school-girl falsely dramatized, the spirit of the girl of all periods ignored and especially the spirit of the girl of to-day. No one acquainted with school girls during the long years of war could help being struck by the utter insincerity of NO ROOM AT THE INN, even as drama it seemed absurd. Yet only a few minutes' walk away was the Swiss film, MARIE LOUISE, a touching tale of the



*Juliet (Renée Asherson). 1946.*



*Marie Louise (Josiane). 1945.*



*Francesca (Ann Todd). 1945.*

evacuated child, without a trace of false sentiment. The tender relationship that almost inevitably grew up between the child and the temporary parents fostered, of course, by the growing length of the war was shown by a few significant scenes, never over-prolonged or over-sentimentalized.

As a masterpiece of sincerity and sympathy Ann Todd's Francesca in the film *THE SEVENTH VEIL* will probably never be surpassed, it might well form a standard for other, and probably quite different, productions. We can and must have freshness and sympathy and above all understanding when we enter into the spirit of young girls, each so different, each so essentially herself. Girlhood need no longer be confined on the stage or screen to over-alert juveniles, sometimes associated with American children, or to a sentimentality which is in *our* hearts rather than in them. The under sixteens are a charming age, an age of dreaming and an age of common-sense. We can make it seem tiresome or illusive, if we choose, but, if we care to, we can quite easily understand.





THE PICK-UP GIRL. *The denunciation of the girl, to the judge by her friend's mother (Ilona Ference and Ernest Jay.) 1946.*

## 12. THE PICK-UP GIRL

THE PICK-UP GIRL was surely conceived rather than written—a long series of visits to the American juvenile delinquent courts, no doubt a period of digestion, and then the play. It is obviously true to life, but the problems are so human that it seems to matter little whether they occurred in England or America.

Nor could it have been first produced under better conditions. The intimacy of a really small theatre was exactly in tune with the intimacy of what was taking place. In the front row of the tiny Lindsey we might have been Elizabethians almost literally reclining on the stage, yet we felt rather that we were in a public gallery at the Law Courts not looking at a stage set. We left realizing what a lot we should all gain, young and old, by going more to the Law Courts and seeing at first hand the raw drama of life, that takes place there.

"Elizabeth Collins" is no stage beauty, she is just a nice-looking girl whom we might meet in any street, hovering between childhood and womanhood, only more distressed and perplexed. After all what she did did not seem at the time so very dreadful. And her parents too are just a middle-aged couple that we might meet any day only more anxious and worried. Never was a play less "acted", never more really alive. It was the same in the larger theatre in the West End, and even in the provinces at Reading, with quite a different cast, it was still essentially itself, just a scene in a juvenile court. It would indeed be difficult to be false in THE PICK-UP GIRL, the subject is too intensely human.

Nothing is shirked, nothing crudely over-emphasized. The girl still with a

peculiarly childish innocence has slept on several occasions with men who have picked her up and, having been found on examination to have contracted syphilis, she is about to be taken away from her parents for treatment. Of course there is a painful intimacy about all this, but, unless we are confirmed shirkers, is there not a painful intimacy about a lot of life? Is it not better to be struck by the pathos, the urgency of a particular case before we meet one in real life? A few words from the girl or from her distraught and hopelessly inadequate father and mother are surely



THE PICK-UP  
GIRL. *At  
the trial. The  
girl's friend  
hands her his  
violin before  
giving evidence.  
(Jessica Spencer  
—first pro-  
duction—and  
David  
Markham.)  
1946.*



worth a whole sheaf of pamphlets. But the play goes far deeper than the particular problem it deals with, it must surely spread a width as well as a depth of feeling in all who see it. Not many years ago such a play would have produced howls of disapproval, not at what it taught, for it taught nothing but good, but that it should have been produced at all. To-day there was hardly a protest. Instead Queen Mary went to one of the first performances at the small Lindsey Club, and the play soon after enjoyed a far wider popularity at one of the largest London theatres.



THE PICK-UP  
GIRL.  
*The aftermath.  
The girl with  
her mother.*  
(Patricia  
Plunkett—  
second  
production—  
and Joan  
Miller.) 1946.

# COMPARISONS

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## 13. TESS, TESSA AND FRANCESCA

How young one can be at twenty, how old at eight. During the past fifty years, often at long intervals, there have been girls and young women, between fifteen and twenty-five, essentially themselves, yet with a remarkable similarity. There have been Tess, Tessa and Francesca. At first sight there may appear a great difference in age between TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES, and THE CONSTANT NYMPH or the school-girl Francesca of THE SEVENTH VEIL. On second thoughts, however, is there not an



TESS OF THE  
D'URBERVILLES.  
*The elopement.* (Wendy  
Hiller and Henry  
Mollison.) 1947.





TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES. *The final scene.* (Wendy Hiller and William Devlin.) 1946.

instinctive, perhaps childish loyalty in each of them that adds the grace and charm of unspoilt youth? Wasn't Tess at heart a mere overgrown child, though she had an illegitimate child of her own?

Of course there were drastic differences, but it is in these differences with the fundamental similarity beneath that the interest and excitement of the comparison consists. Each in turn have been fortunate in appearing on the stage or screen in the form of people who instead of acting a part stepped into their skins. Recently we have had a very living Tess in a London theatre. Wendy Hiller succeeded in not only being a very human, a very individual, Tess but part of the Dorset meadows as well. As she faces a decorous, absurdly second-born husband, then an ardent lover, and later at her arrest, the play might easily have become a farce and then a melodrama. As it was, it was pure humanity throughout, "triste et gai, tour à tour". Tess meets her end as inevitably as the sun sets over the trees, a child who could not see that far.

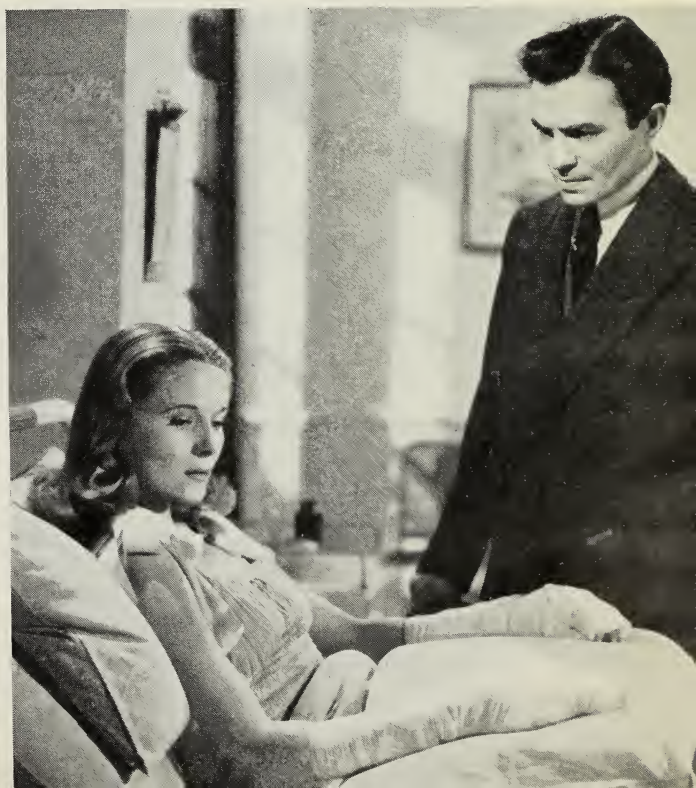
We were equally fortunate, many years ago and on a very different plane, in *THE CONSTANT NYMPH*. How natural Edna Best was in spite of the efforts of the rest of the distinguished cast to live up to the bohemian and very foreign atmosphere of this somewhat strained play. Elissa Landi, Aubrey Mather, Marie Ney, Cathleen Nesbitt, Noel Coward and later John Gielgud, all fought bravely to maintain this atmosphere, but Edna Best did not fight at all. She ignored it, she was just Tessa, "a child and a woman" at the same time.

It is a pity that the heroine of the film *THE SEVENTH VEIL* is called Francesca, and the public quite rightly ignored her name. Nothing could be more English than Ann Todd. To her honour she remained an Ann from the beginning to the end. She is amazingly real. In this interesting film she develops perfectly naturally as she grows more of a young woman, and the lanky legs of the schoolgirl disappear beneath the long skirts of the prima donna. Yet in essentials she is still the same and in the end her love for music and her teacher still remains one. The heart of a child is often divided but seldom for long. In this respect, if in no other, Tess, Tessa and Francesca remain essentially alike.





THE SEVENTH VEIL. 1945.  
*Francesca (Ann Todd) meets her  
 guardian, Nicholas (James Mason).*



THE SEVENTH VEIL. 1945.  
*Francesca (Ann Todd) returns to her  
 guardian.*

#### 14. TRILBY TO-DAY

HOWEVER much an English girl may try to become Trilby—and many have tried—Trilby on the London stage seems to be in Paris as a tourist. Possibly it is partly because Trilby had an Irish mother and was never quite part of Paris. Yet she was no tourist. Though half Irish she was a settler in Paris, waiting for some Englishmen to discover her and in the discovery to find an affinity that Svengali never found.

In many ways Joan Bennett in *SCARLET STREET* is a modern Trilby. In the strictest sense of the word neither were as moral as they were portrayed, Trilby was moralized into perfection by Victorian sentimentality and Joan Bennett in *SCARLET STREET* into something very near it by an unexpectedly particular film censor.

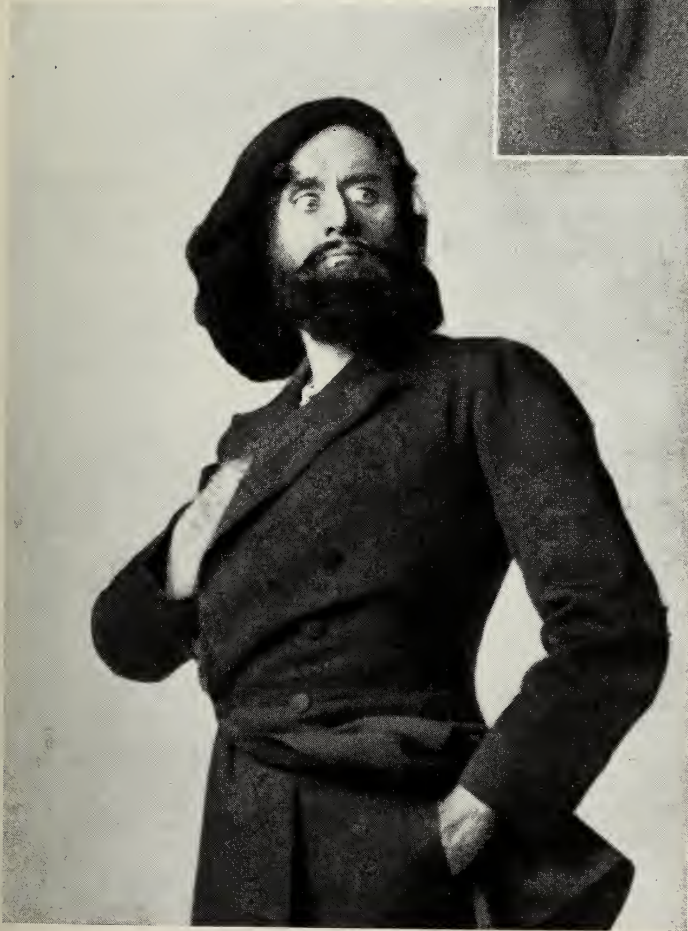
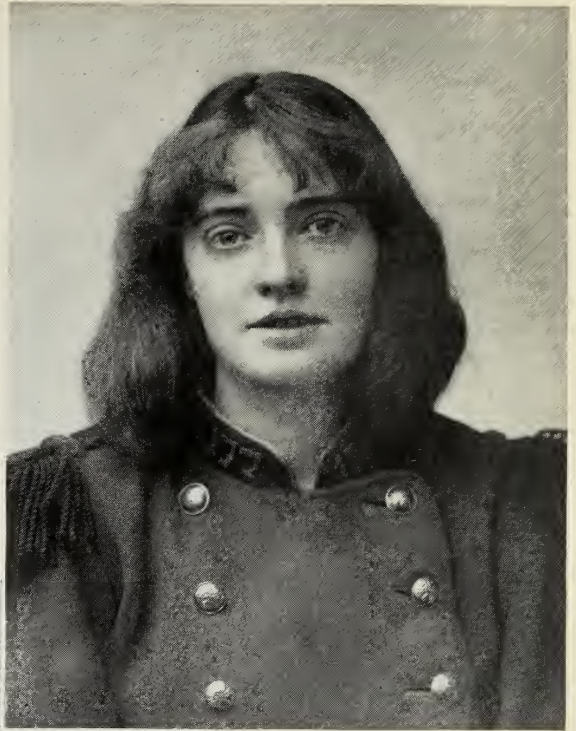
“What is art?” Joan Bennett asks as she becomes friendly with the artist, and surely Trilby must also have wondered. “Art is a love affair,” the artist answered, and though Trilby’s admirers probably felt the same they were far too Victorian to express their feelings so bluntly.

*SCARLET STREET.* (Joan Bennett and Edward G. Robinson in the Bar.) 1946.





*Trilby (Dorothea Baird)  
October 30, 1895.  
Theatre Royal, Haymarket.*



*Svengali (Herbert Tree),  
October 30, 1895.  
Theatre Royal, Haymarket.*

It is curious how the glamour of *TRILBY* still survives and how the glamour of *SCARLET STREET* was seldom emphasized. Probably there were many at the time who felt that anything that du Maurier wrote must be gentlemanly and as anything gentlemanly must have glamour so *TRILBY* had glamour plus a certain spice. If this is so, the label has certainly stuck. But *SCARLET STREET* lacked a du Maurier and many thought that a film about the underworld must necessarily be crude, they were prepared to shut their eyes to the tenderness and humanity. But the tenderness and humanity did not need much looking for. Joan Bennett was no mere vamp. She had charm and moments of gentleness and doubt, and, with all the sordidness of her life, was not sordid herself.

There will be many Trilbys in the future, professional Trilbys like Viola Tree, artistic Trilbys like Phyllis Neilson Terry and those with the natural charm of Dorothea Baird whom "everybody knew could not act"! There will also be many plays with a Trilby as a heroine though in many different circumstances and many different environments. Each will reflect the charm, the glamour of their age, but the Good and the Bad of the days when du Maurier wrote *TRILBY* will never return unless we live in a Nazi state. We will no longer have to explain that a girl "may have a lot of good in her" though she is Bad, and a lot of "bad in her" though she is Good, and that sitting for an artist "for the altogether" does not necessarily mean utter degradation.

## 15. THE HORSY GIRL

*NATIONAL VELVET* was a sympathetic and often a moving play; but its chief interest lay in the fact that it tackled boldly, and almost poetically, a neglected theme—a girl's absorption in riding and the love of horses. Perhaps its chief fault was that emotionally it hovered between poetry and prose, and it had not quite enough of either. The girl's love of horses became occasionally an almost abstract quality, too trite for poetry, too prosy for living prose. She seemed to cease to be a girl and became almost a pathological study, a girl who never grew up, a Peter Pan in the silliest sense.

Such an interesting, such a human play could have been written round this neglected subject, the horsey girl is often so loveable. Would she not have developed an affection for someone partly, or even wholly, because of their love for horses? Would he not have given her a horse instead of an engagement ring; and if she really loved horses how little his station in life, or even if he was married or not would have mattered. Then Velvet with her passion for horses would have still remained a girl not a mere container for obsessions. But such a play has yet to be written.



It is curious that within a year of the production of *NATIONAL VELVET* the actual case of a young girl, obviously a lover of horses and yet human enough to fall in love with the man who gave her her first horse, received considerable publicity but little sympathetic consideration. It showed that even the stage or screen, with all the world to choose from, can get so obsessed with an idea that they can forget what life is really like. They get utterly outdone in drama, in romance and in living suffering humanity by a chance case in a Law Court. If this goes on, the Law Courts will surely become more crowded and the theatres and cinemas emptier.

In the meantime there might well be a play or a film not only giving us a more convincing horsey girl but also showing us the kind of man who falls in love with her, and her feelings towards him. Treated with the sympathy that the stage and screen are now capable of it might well effect the public's attitude, and the Law's too, towards individual cases.

## 16. MODERN CINDERELLAS

THERE are few plays or films without some kind of a Cinderella. It is a theme with endless variations, by no means confined to pantomimes. *THE GLASS SLIPPER* ventured on the simple story of Cinderella that we are accustomed to see at Christmas but stripped of the overwhelming pantomime distractions that have grown to seem an almost inevitable part of it. It was a simple and charming and not over-childish rendering, and perhaps contained the root of the story as far as there can be a common root to something whose branches have such varied fruit.

The Cinderella theme, however, lies buried far deeper. It is in the plot of Ann Todd's recent stage successes—*Madeleine Smith*, the girl accused of murder in *THE REST IS SILENCE*, and still more in *LOTTIE DUNDASS*, the girl who is denied the part in a play she longs to interpret. It is also in *CYNARA*, in the sad fate of the little bathing belle, and in the film *BRIEF ENCOUNTER*, in the housewife who whilst shopping gets a piece of coal dust in her eye and finds herself hopelessly involved in a distressingly inconclusive love-affair. In both, so different and yet so curiously similar in feeling, Celia Johnson showed great tenderness and delicacy—after an interval of fifteen years. The tender moments in the film were never overdone and were yet further proof that the cinema can if it likes rise far above the average theatre.

It is often in the small theatre clubs that plays with real delicacy begin and happily do not always end. *THE RISING SUN* was a little masterpiece and Dorothy Gordon as her father's devoted but practical daughter gave us a quiet but human and unobtrusively appealing little person, a hitherto unexplored aspect of Cinderella. About the same time at another theatre club Mary Horn gave us a very different variation

in POWER WITHOUT GLORY, a rebellious, but none the less thwarted, girl whose head was stuffed with pathetic fantasies.

An equally sincere, and by far the most painful, modern Cinderella has appeared in ANGEL, the story of a partly insane girl who murders her small half brother. How well it suggests, and how truthfully, the Law Courts' difficulties in dealing with children of all ages. The pathetic little spinster of forty leaves her prison, after

a commuted death sentence, the same lonely creature she always was.

The list of cinderellas knows no bounds, it includes the crudest and also the most delicate variations, often so tender that it may seem to some pedantic to ally them to the original Cinderella theme. But allied they are and in a very real way. There are many Cinderellas to-day not sitting in rags by a half-dead fire, and there are many princes waiting to bring warmth to their hearts though they may not come as princes in fairy coaches or even in a Rolls Royce.



THE RISING SUN.

1946.

(Dorothy Gordon and Michael Gwynn.)

THE GLASS SLIPPER.  
1945.  
(Sara Gregory.)



CYNARA. 1930.  
(Celia Johnson and  
Gerald du Maurier.)



# THE YOUNG WOMAN OF TO-DAY

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## 17. WILDE HAD NOT RECKONED WITH ANGELA LANSBURY

THE PICTURE OF *DORIAN GRAY* is a half-way film. Hollywood had an eye on the future but it could not shake off altogether its crude traditions. The picture, itself, which after all gives the name to the story, was crude to the verge of absurdity and the girl's suicide and later the tragic ending was completely unreal, lost in a vain attempt at melodrama. Yet it was most interesting and in spite of all its faults very attractive.

It was Angela Lansbury who took possession of the film, she was both the making and the marring of it. She gave most of it complete realism and yet showed up its absurdities. "Good-bye little yellow bird," was a song of genuine sentiment without a trace of bathos. Would that she had also been allowed, like Sibyl in the original, to play Juliet and Rosalind against the background of an East End tavern. It was impossible not to believe in her all the time she was there, it was only her suicide off that seemed completely unlikely.

But what of Wilde? The plain fact is that he was completely left out of it. He might, if alive, have tried to put up a fight against Angela Lansbury's wholesome, fascinating sincerity, but he would probably have retreated, murmuring that he found her tedious. Gone was the tainted atmosphere of what was surely one of the most tainted stories. One felt that something was the cause of the trouble with the picture and of his desertion of Angela Lansbury, but it might have been anything, there was not even a sense of mystery about it. He might have fallen in love with a millionaire's daughter or been engrossed in gambling on the Stock Exchange, and if Angela Lansbury had been her true self, so delightfully shown us, she would have shed a few very large tears, said "Well, that's that", and gone back to singing "Good-bye little yellow bird" even more naturally than before. But suicide, no. She was not that kind of girl, she was far too wholesome, too sensible for that.

Was this story, without Wilde, amusing or even ridiculous? Ridiculous, certainly not, Angela Lansbury's sincerity prevented that. Amusing, perhaps, to those who remembered or could realize the atmosphere in which Wilde wrote—the cultured perversion of his section of society.

There was something fitting in Angela Lansbury passing on to her next film, *THE HARVEY GIRLS*, in which a group of very moral American young ladies dance and sing with very little on to a lot of degraded men in order to convert them from girls with even less clothes and considerably less morality. Even here there was a





THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY. 1945.

(Billy Bevan, Angela Lansbury and Hurd Hatfield in the slummy music hall.)

genuineness about Angela Lansbury, stripped, poor girl, in such a good cause, but there was an inevitable absurdity about the theme of the play that even she could not obliterate, and one was never quite sure whether the whole story was not a farce. THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY was a triumph for George Lansbury's granddaughter, so full of his captivating integrity. THE HARVEY GIRLS was merely a skirmish.

## 18. THE ENGLISH GIRL IN UNIFORM

IT is to be hoped that *THIS ABOVE ALL* will be preserved for all time, not only as a fundamentally true document of the war, but as a very tender document. The situations are unique in the sense that one feels they happened to that particular man and to that particular girl, but normal in the sense that such things did happen under war conditions at home. It is a fitting companion to the American film *THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES*.

Whatever may have happened abroad the English girl at the outbreak of war was not as a rule used to wearing uniform and she inevitably became different and yet still the same. There was a new freedom and yet a new constraint, a new charm and a new lack of charm. There was, moreover, a mixing of the classes.

Some of the less dramatic moments of the film are the most memorable. The scene, for example, where the service girl changes from her uniform into civilian dress to please the man she is spending the week-end with, is handled with complete frankness yet with extraordinary delicacy. No praise could be too high for the simplicity of Joan Fontaine living the part of Prue; she is, as Clive says, very beautiful but she is an ordinary believable girl for all that. Nor has there been on the stage or on the screen a more believable or lovable father than Prue's father, Philip Merivale, and the scene in which she confides in him avoids all the old pitfalls of the cinema and achieves all the triumphs of sincerity of the new type of film on which it has embarked.

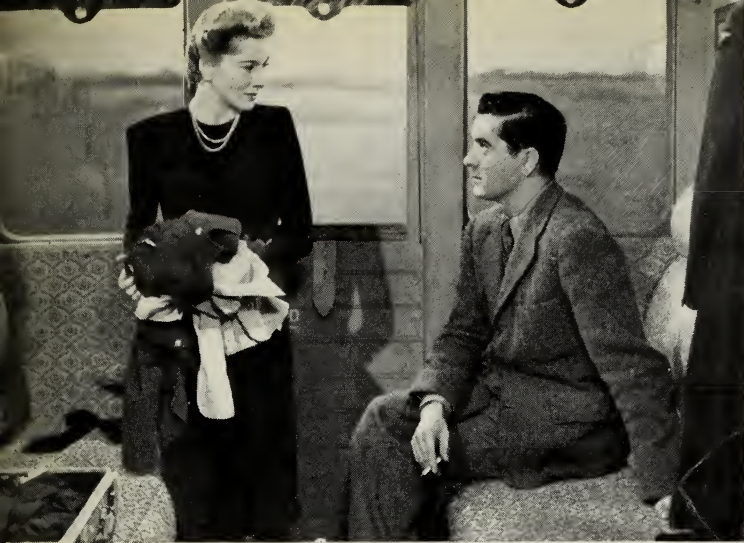
Possibly one of the most living scenes, without a tinge of false sentiment, is Prue's meeting with the cockney fireman. She is walking amongst the ruins in the early morning after a blitz wondering whether she will find her soldier alive or dead. "We are going to win the war," the cockney fireman says with absolute conviction and without a trace of affectation. "We are going to see a better England because most of us didn't give up. So don't you give up either, ma'am."

No one would have believed some years ago when the cinema was still so full of rhetoric and rubbish that a film like this, so simple and yet so full of the meaning of its time, could be produced. It shows once again that the cinema has proved itself in a very few years not only a sensitive and subtle means of expression but a unique and truthful method of keeping a record of bygone days in all their freshness, their humanity and charm.



*THIS ABOVE ALL. (1942.)  
A cockney W.A.A.F. arranges  
a "blind" date for Prue (Joan  
Fontaine).*





*Prue meets the deserter Clive (Tyronne Power) and changes into civilian clothes in the train.*



*Above: Prue's father (Philip Merivale) and his family hear of Prue's week-end with a deserter.*



*The deserter makes good.*



## 19. "I AM NOT *THAT* PEGGY"

THE discharged American airman, half drunk after celebrating his return lies on a comfortable bed and wonders where he is. He fails to recognize the daughter of another ex-service man though it is her family who have put him up for the night. "Don't you know me?" she says as she arranges his pillow, "I'm Peggy." But he still does not recognize her. The name Peggy merely suggests a girl who should be dragged closer to him and kissed, and, as he pulls her towards him, she loses her balance and falls sprawling on top of him.

But Peggy has had two years' training in a hospital and has also done a course of social hygiene and she is ready to meet any emergency. "Oh no," she says, disentangling herself and picking up his coat to brush, "I am not *that* Peggy". It was all rather disconcerting but she is merely stating a fact and she laughs good-naturedly.

Though THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES is an American film Peggy might belong to almost any nation. She is essentially Peggy Stephenson but she is also one of many modern girls whose outlook on life is only just being appreciated. Two years in a hospital and the course of social hygiene have left their mark but she is as fresh and fragrant as ever, perhaps more so. Her mother need not have worried about keeping her the same till her father returned from the war, nor confessed to him regretfully that their children seem to have grown away from her. "A few years of normal growth," Peggy explains, "that's all," and after a moment's shyness her father understands.

Peggy's normal growth is not always easy. Soon after her father's return she finds herself in love with the airman whom they befriended, and she finds that she is *that* Peggy after all. Her hospital work leaves her both prepared and unprepared for falling in love, especially as the airman happens to be married; beneath all her training in social hygiene she is little more than a young girl, uncertain and perplexed. Yet when the surrender comes one feels that there is something worth surrendering, not a mere feminine frailty to be had for the asking.

How different, and yet in some ways how like, is Wilma, the simple untrained girl of humbler parents, the down on whose arms might well be the down on the willows in the spring, uninstructed in love yet knowing all that is worth knowing. She loved her young sailor when he had hands of his own and she loves him just the same when he returns from the war with two steel hooks instead. It is true that when she first sees them her lips quiver but only for a moment and when later as a test he insists on showing her his whole equipment all shrinking has passed and her love, if possible, is on even firmer ground. It is rooted, one feels, in herself rather than in any conscious loyalty.

Nothing is over-emphasized, or hardly ever over-sentimentalized. THE BEST



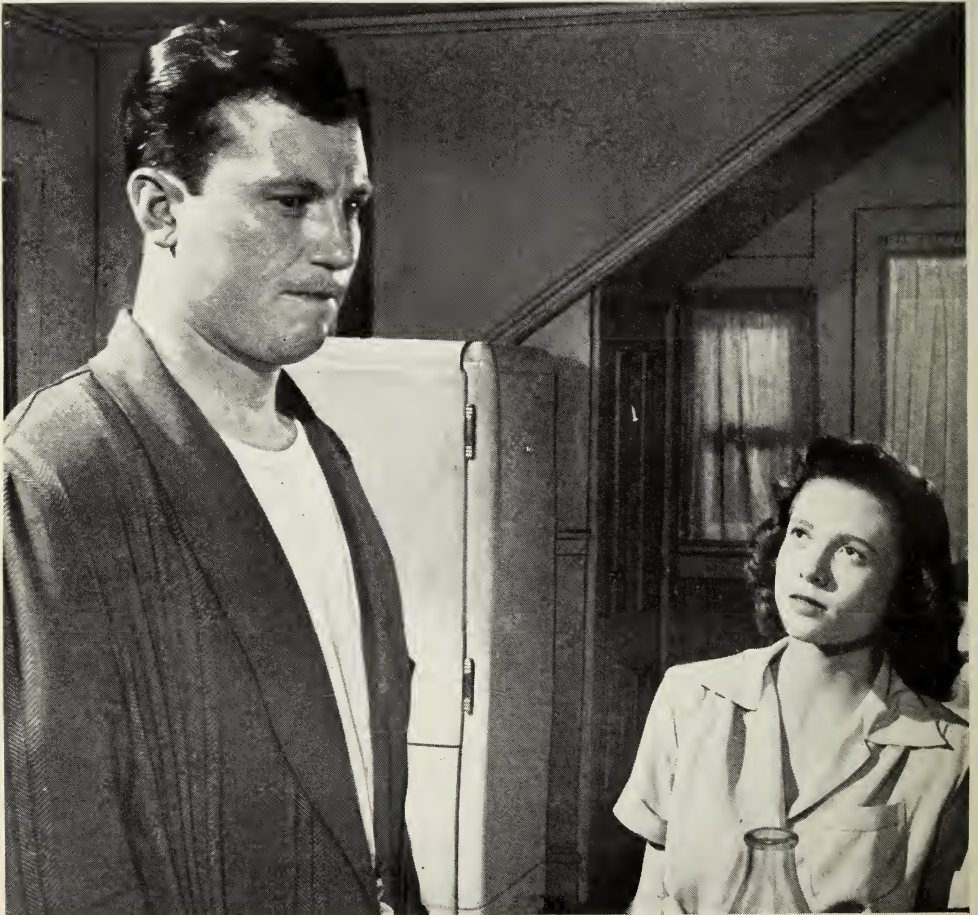
THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES. 1947. Peggy Stephenson (*Teresa Wright*) and Fred Derry (*Dana Andrews*) the returned airman.

*Al Stephenson (Frederic March) the returned soldier with his family.*





YEARS OF OUR LIVES is not only a little masterpiece of freshness and spontaneity, in which each man and woman, young or old, lives his or her life and no other; it seems to mark a definite turning point in the making of American films. There is no mistake this time. It is no ephemeral production, the memory of it will long outlast its actual theme. It will far outlive the difficult post-war years. To give an adequate idea of its humanity and charm would take the whole three hours it lasts—the mother looking affectionately at her daughter who taunts her with never having had any difficulties in *her* married life: “Any difficulties! How often have we had to fall in love all over again.” We even plunge for a moment into America’s banking position: “We must not gamble with our depositors’ money”, the bank manager says as he refuses loans to discharged soldiers whose only security is their integrity. The



*The returned sailor without hands, Homer Parrish (Harold Russell), with his former fiancée Wilma (Cathy O'Donnell).*





*The returned sailor proves he can still shoot straight.*

ex-service man is outraged. "*I say you must not gamble with the future of the world.*"

"I am not *that* Peggy," Peggy said firmly, and finds before long that she *is* that Peggy. "We don't lend money without security," the bank manager said and then discovers that not to lend may be an even greater risk. Is the simple directness and sincerity of this film due partly to the fact that at least one of the cast, the man who loses his hands in the war, is in real life what he is in the film? It may be a dangerous experiment but here it succeeds triumphantly and apparently with little effort. The story, the production and the playing are so sincere that one can hardly believe that the cinema was ever so false, so utterly untrue to life. In the clear fresh daylight of THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES the past history of the cinema seems a mere nightmare, a mixture of stupidity and what is far worse a deliberate betrayal of human nature. Having turned the corner, not only in this film but in several others, quite naturally and with no moralizing or cant, it seems impossible that we should ever retrace our steps.

# ENVOI

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## 20. CELEBRITIES PASS—THE ELLEN TERRYS REMAIN

IN the autumn of 1946 London mourned the death of a business man very closely connected with the stage, of a widow of one of our most famous actors and of one of our best known literary celebrities. Each of their memorial services had a very distinct atmosphere of its own.

Richard Collet, for so many years the manager of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company, was the kindest of business men and a large congregation gathered at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, all their simple direct selves as he would have wished. Sir Seymour Hicks read: "Oh death, where is thy sting? Oh grave, where is thy victory?" so lightly yet so earnestly that he might have been merely shaking off an unpleasant thought that for centuries had quite needlessly haunted the hearts of men.

Lady Alexander's memorial service a few months later at the same church was very different. A host of her friends entered in their large plumed hats and fur coats, talking as vivaciously as if they were at a race meeting, one could hardly believe that in a few minutes Lady Alexander herself would not enter, more vivacious than any, defying the years.

The day before there had been a Tribute Meeting in homage to H. G. Wells at The Royal Institution. In the great round theatre there gathered a variety of people. Beveridge, especially excused from the House of Lords, so he told us—Low, the cartoonist, a serious rather elderly looking man—Priestley, who gave an extemporary tribute very much from his heart. Yet there was something a little barren, almost forbidding about the scene, it might have been a chapter in one of Wells' prophetic works. Gone was the warmth of any religious sentiment, the gift of any music; a chilly secular atmosphere took its place. There was genuine sorrow, some touches of intimacy, a just summary of Wells' work and of his position in the world of letters, but even the most kindly words



*Ellen Terry.*



seemed spoken in a strange vacuum, in a laboratory, the home of test tubes.

All these, however, formed merely a background to what was to come. In February of the following year there was a service, far more human, in memory of Ellen Terry, a celebration at St. Paul's, Covent Garden, of the centenary of her birth. The sight and smell of spring daffodils greeted us as we entered, so wild, so



*A cover from THE PICTURE POST 1944.*



carelessly sprinkled about the altar that we should perhaps have called them daffs; it would certainly have been more in keeping with the Covent Garden porters outside and probably with Ellen Terry too. The ushers, everyone a famous actor, arrived long after a large congregation had assembled outside, but what did it matter when on the steps of the church a cheerful little clergyman told comic stories to entertain the waiting crowd?

When everyone was finally settled and Emlyn Williams, having abandoned the difficult task of assorting celebrities in the centre of the church, had packed his side aisle and was surveying the scene, the service began. Even the Bishop of London tried to simplify himself and relax, though there was something unreal, almost tawdry, about his mitre and purple vestments. Theirs was the sincerity of the past, the congregation from the theatre seemed to have captured a deeper sincerity. It is the exquisite lines from MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING, or Peggy Ashcroft's beautiful simple rendering of one of Shakespeare's sonnets, that linger in the memory. A list of famous names would be superfluous—Ralph Richardson, Harcourt Williams, Edith Craig—for as Ellen Terry would have said, "they were *all* there, wasn't it wonderful. God bless them."

That afternoon I picked up quite by chance an old *Picture Post*, and there was proof, if proof there need be, that Ellen Terry was no exotic type, or even bred of her age, but just her sensitive simple self, as so many others could be. On the cover of the *Picture Post* was a young Ellen Terry of to-day, no doubt one of many if we care to look for them, free of all the affectations and inhibitions, which become part of ourselves if we allow them, and of all the superficiality and the dullness of a mechanical mind. How easy to be laborious if we once embark on it; how difficult to be natural unless from the start we have remained our unaffected selves.

Is it really so difficult to shut out all this self-imposed artificiality? Ellen Terry did not find it so, either on or off the stage. Let us say to our modern Coquelins, be they ever so famous, and to their face if necessary, "I am wearied of your studied acting"; and in applauding the Ellen Terrys of to-day, waiting to be encouraged, we shall at least have the satisfaction of knowing that a growing section of the public is with us. In by-gone days the public loved Ellen Terry but did they connect their love for her with the love of simplicity? Now it is different, we are tired of acting, we are thirsting for the sincere, the direct, the spontaneous, but though these things grow naturally, we can smother them if we choose, for in "*our love they live.*"

## POSTSCRIPT

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THERE is inevitably a gap—this time happily of only a few months—between the completion of a book and its publication, and during this period things happen. MAYA at the Arts was an interesting, but crude, attempt to prove that the “prostitute” is always true to type. To bolster up this belief and give it a slightly distinguished atmosphere the play adopts the technique, several hundred years too late, of an Everyman or Morality play. But a Bunyan re-chauffé with no Pilgrim and no Progress and instead a mere garniture of smart typical sayings, all spoken at the right moment, is a sickly dish to set before the pit or even the stalls, and it is a relief to hear the young school-girl say with *personal* conviction to her school-boy friend—“I’ll never forget you, no never”. Midst so much that is unconvincing the simplest words come as a relief.

From America we have had THE VOICE OF THE TURTLE, an attempt to prove, not that prostitutes are a type by themselves, but that really smart women are amateur prostitutes. But the type has been merely enlarged by what we may call a subsection, and it is equally dull. The author of YOUNG WOODLEY, so human a play, has chosen to prostitute his talents so that we in London may wonder once more why Americans like this sort of thing.

The inadequacy of Noel Coward’s PEACE IN OUR TIME may be due to a decline in Coward himself or merely to a changing public that is no longer interested in him. Time alone will show what this failure, a failure more in integrity of thought and feeling than in anything else, pointed to. Meantime the dislike of “acting”, even if it is merely the “behaviour” of a Noel Coward, increases, and the atmosphere that surrounds the theatre and the cinema is becoming clearer. Popular education, psychology slowly sinking into the minds and hearts of the ordinary man, a tendency to more than merely yield to emotions, has done its work. For better or worse we have tasted of the Tree of Knowledge and know sincerity and insincerity whenever we see it.

A visit to a performance of WINGS at Oxford on an August evening in 1947—a performance of remarkable integrity and charm—showed how well individual performances throughout the whole cast could be preserved even in a full scale musical revue. Large musical shows usually represent little that is intimate or personal, a perfectly drilled chorus, evenly matched, stereotyped jokes and stylised tenderness usually predominate. But here in Oxford on that warm summer evening the Royal Air Force produced something quite different. The large chorus, often fifty or a hundred on the stage at the same time, were never incoherent in their minglings, yet there was no suggestion of drilling or stage management; each man and woman, as at an Oberammergau play, was essentially himself or herself, essentially an individual—for had they not come over for each performance, very much individuals, in motor

buses from their Royal Air Force camp? And in the midst of these large effects, so well-massed yet composed so essentially of people we know, was a central purpose nearly always lacking in a large revue. It was not so much propaganda for the Air Force but a picture true to life, yet with an atmosphere of its own, far from photographic. Never merely factual, yet seldom over romanticised or unduly sentimentalised, it showed recruiting meetings among the English people we know and love so well, scenes at Canteens, and towards the end a few of our fellow countrymen stepping selfconsciously and with slight embarrassment amongst masses of slaughtered Germans. Hardly a phase of life in the Air Force was neglected and if moral there need be, stated in words, we had the closing sentence—"We shall fly again but with no need to kill".

Plays with grave faults, like Shakespeare's, are often the plays that last; slick perfection leads nowhere. As this goes to press the problem of the child of divorced parents is presented at the Arts in *CHILD'S PLAY*—with amazing crudity in the first scene and surprising tenderness in the four that followed. Seldom has there been anything fresher than Hugh Burden's father and Michael Lewer's Robin. Occasionally there seems an undue anxiety to keep abreast of the times, to talk psychology, to skim over a problem where there might be more brooding. But these are minor faults compared to the artificiality from which we are emerging. Never before has the English theatre, and often the cinema, been more alive, full of such infinite variety and fraught with such infinite possibilities. Never before have so many players lived rather than performed their parts, showing us men and women like ourselves.











